

Chinese Science Fiction: A Genre of Adversity

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MOST, if not all Chinese science fiction scholars will agree on two things; that the current form of science fiction from China can be traced back to a starting point in 1989 that “signalled the arrival of a new wave in Chinese science fiction” (Song 8); and that the science fiction genre is originally a Western genre,¹ in that “Science, technology, and modernization are not characteristic of Chinese culture” (Han 20). In accepting these two points, we can start to recognise that Chinese science fiction is a genre that was born in crisis and continues to grow through hardship—it is a genre of adversity.

In China, science fiction isn’t a mainstream genre, but is growing, and getting recognition in part due to the international limelight that it has received over the last few years. The relationship between the Western genre and its Chinese writers have inadvertently brought science fiction from China together with science fiction by Chinese diaspora writers, led by Asian-American writers.

The culmination of Chinese science fiction by writers from China and diaspora writers created a genre that highlights a duality, of “Chinese-ness” and the (Western) science fiction genre itself. All writers who delve into this form of cultural literature must navigate both, and both come with their own baggage.

Chinese science fiction started to receive notable attention in the West, especially in the United Kingdom and America, when Liu Cixin, “The most prominent and popular SF writer of the recent renaissance” (Han 17) won the Hugo Award in 2015 for *The Three-Body Problem*. It was the first translated novel to do so, and it is crucial to note that the translator was the Chinese-American writer Ken Liu, who, a few years before, had earned his own Hugo Award (2012) and a Nebula Award (2011) for his short story, “The Paper Menagerie.” Ken Liu’s achievements are important to note here because with them, he rallied his fans in China by being “the second Chinese-American after Ted Chiang to win major SF awards in the United States” (Han 15). Both these writers created a desire for more Chinese science fiction in China, Europe and America. They had set the stage for their colleagues to follow.

This new wave in Chinese science fiction as described by Professor Song, “is

more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representation of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism” (8) making the genre the “cultural currency of contemporary Chinese literature as the most accurate lens through which to view and truly understand China” (Chau 113).

However, despite this cultural currency, Chinese science fiction isn’t a natural development in Chinese literature. Han Song sees the values of science fiction (which he characterises as: science, technology, and modernization) to be alien entities to writers from China. “If we [writers from China] buy into them, we turn ourselves into monsters, and that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress” (Han 20). He also suggests that “science fiction is perceived as inconsequential [in China] because it is unable to solve real-life problems. And the government can step in if it seems that the genre has gone too far conceptually” (Han 21). This means that science fiction writers in China are outsiders to the genre, dabbling in a Western concept only so far as it is not seen as a threat by their own government.

This duality that writers in China have to work with isn’t new to Chinese diaspora writers internationally. They have been writing with this duality, by choosing to include their personal cultural experiences in stories that still fit the expectations of the science fiction genre. Whether the works are written in English, or translated from Chinese to English, writers and translators alike are aware of the cultural imbalance global literature presents, where “Educated Chinese readers are expected not only to know about all the Chinese references—history, language, culture, all this stuff—but to be well-versed in Western references as well. A Chinese reader can decode an American work with far greater facility than an American reader can decode a Chinese work, on average” (Pandell).

Han Song’s comment above came from a paper published in 2013, since when “in 2016, China’s State Council announced a four-year plan for promoting scientific literacy among its citizens, including a step-by-step process for popularizing science through the production of SF.” Writers in China are encouraged to inspire teenagers with their quality writing, and “to popularize scientific learning and to contribute to China’s status as a world technology power” (Chau 115). This doesn’t remove the problem that Han Song had noted. However, it constituted an official endorsement of the need for China to participate in the production of science fiction, of ‘Western

progress.’ Looking back, the four-year plan can probably be deemed successful, as Chinese science fiction (notably through works by Liu Cixin and Ken Liu) began to attract new and more influential readers internationally, not least Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg both of whom endorsed Liu Cixin’s trilogy in 2017 (Frank). This coincided with a time when China started to be more active in cultural exportation (Sun). According to some critics, genre fiction (including science fiction), finds itself at a considerable advantage in reshaping cultural mediascape after all (Chau 123).

This exportation of Chinese science fiction, a modern genre reflecting China’s growing role in the world economy, is best viewed in conjunction with a broader process of cultural commodification, or as modern Chinese literature scholar Angie Chau sees it, a process of cultural deterioration (113) in Chinese literature, where “the Chinese had suddenly discovered that books, even literary works, could be treated as commodities to be mass produced, advertised, and sold for profit” (Kong 4). As the world started to get to know China more through Chinese science fiction, China started to experience a change in their own cultural production, as literary journals—a crucial cog to the publishing industry in China in the past—moved from being socialist state-sponsored institutions to market-oriented cultural enterprises. As the older journals learn to grapple with the market economy (locally and then internationally), they also meet new competition from popular and genre fiction journals, triggering the contention between high and low art in Chinese literature production. And typically, science fiction—as genre fiction—is considered a popular, low art.

The drastic turns in Chinese literature reflect what writer Chen Qiufan calls the “drastic transformation and fracture between different social forms.” Chen explains that in a hundred years, China’s progression rate outmatched any of the progress from the West that took over centuries to complete. “From the late Qing dynasty to the Republic of China, to the founding of the People’s Republic of China, to learning from the Soviet Union, to the reform and opening up, every stage lasted only about a few decades” (Sun).

The West, with American media at its forefront responded to this whirlwind progress by presenting their anxieties through “techno-Orientalism”: “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse”—of “an ‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations” (Roh et al. 2 & 3). As Chinese writers, from

mainland China and internationally, continue to grapple with the duality of writing Chinese-ness with (Western) science fiction, they're also, unknowingly, having to tackle concepts of techno-Orientalism in their own writing, a "danger that Asian and Asian American creators might internalize techno-Orientalist patterns and uncritically replicate the same dehumanizing model" (Roh et al. 7).

Chen Qiufan has also argued that "There is something very science fictional and fantastic about this very drastic social transformation. At the foundation, the soil of rural China is still there, not thoroughly washed away. This has led to the co-existence of many different layers of society, which science fiction is best suited to present" (Sun). Though the larger situation in which China finds itself can be reflected within Chinese science fiction, it remains the case (as with Han Song's comment about Western progress and concepts, noted above), the lens in which we look at China and Chinese science fiction, is unfortunately, Western-tinted. This creates the inevitable encounter with techno-Orientalist aesthetics.

Though this will not be discussed in detail in this paper, it can be noted that this discourse is problematic in itself, for it assumes that concepts of science, technology, and modernization belongs wholly to the West, and that any contact it has with East Asia are Orientalist in nature (whether Orientalist, post-Orientalist, or techno-Orientalist). Here, the techno-Orientalist discourse falls into the same postcolonial rhetoric from which it declares itself attempting to break out, by assuming that because Chinese is the ethnic culture in the equation, that when it comes in contact with the West, it loses its nativism, while the Western body gains in knowledge. Rey Chow describes this post-colonialist attribute as one where "the values involved are hierarchically determined and tend to work in one direction only: the original, so to speak, exists as the sole, primary standard by which the copy is judged, but not vice versa; the white man, and the white man alone, is authentic" (Chow 104).

However, going back to the opening statement of this paper: since most Chinese science fiction writers and scholars agree with the fact that science fiction, at least, is a Western genre, it can be argued that Chinese science fiction, in struggling with techno-Orientalist developments in the (Western) science fiction genre, begins to develop techno-Occidentalism tendencies to compensate. In this scenario techno-Occidentalism becomes Chinese science fiction's strategy to decolonise its use of the Western genre and concepts. While techno-Orientalism "serve to both express and assuage Western anxieties about Asia's growing cultural influence and economic

dominance” (Roh et al. Summary), techno-Occidentalism is Asia’s response to these anxieties through demonstrating a rich diversity in its membership.

Liu Cixin and Ken Liu, as writers, prefer to project a non-political image. While they are invested in promoting the genre of SF, they have been known to attempt to dissuade readers from the notion that there is something inherently ‘Chinese’ about their writing (Chau 127). Liu Cixin says he prefers “Anglophone science fiction fans to read his books ‘because it’s science fiction, not because it’s ‘Chinese’ science fiction” (Chau 126), and in the introduction in his 2016 anthology, *Invisible Planets*, Ken Liu questions what kind of meaningful purpose the label of ‘Chinese science fiction’ can serve, given the incredible diversity of the works and their authors” (Liu 16). This precisely emphasizes the fact that Chinese science fiction’s image is a problem when other writers, like Han Song, are happy to affirm Chinese science fiction’s position, noting that “Present-day sf authors have touched on a wide variety of subjects and added noticeable Chinese colors to the genre” (Han 17). Ken Liu’s anthology also includes a paper by Xia Jia entitled “What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?” a curious book-end to his opening remark that draws readers’ attention to the issue of ‘China and Chinese-ness’ in Chinese science fiction.

Interestingly, what Ken Liu, Liu Cixin, Han Song, Xia Jia, and other Chinese science fiction writers are trying to grasp in their tug-of-war on the term Chinese is precisely the impossible notion that Chinese-ness can be understood on its own, or that China can be represented clearly as a nation apolitically and without involving its diaspora. The word ‘Chinese’ has too many meanings—nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, even food. And when we consider that “retention of Chinese cultural heritage is important” (Wei 177) to life in the diaspora, we start to see how problematic this question of ‘Chinese-ness’ can become. If we consider as well that the duality Chinese science fiction writers have to manage is similar to that of the diaspora, are they then trying to simply justify their own fixations of Chinese culture, whatever that may be?

This assertion of culture is the techno-Occidentalist impulse that Xia Jia describes, where: “the Chinese had to wake up from their five-thousand-year-old dream of being an ancient civilization and start to dream of becoming a democratic, independent, prosperous modern nation-state” (Xia 378). It is the realisation that the shape of what ‘Chinese’ means is different today, despite an unbroken history of five millennia, and requires advocacy.

In Chen Qiufan's novel, *The Waste Tide* (originally published 2013; published in English, in Ken Liu's translation, in 2019), the monster, Mimi, and the book itself, were both born in and of China. They both reveal characteristics of techno-Orientalism, where the country—China, and Mimi are seen as inventions of information capitalism. Except, this is no longer just in imagination and is actually reflective of China's current position. As the consumption of information technology increases in the world, the constantly-ignored process of e-waste management gets delegated to East Asia. And as China itself replaces America as the largest producer of e-waste (Chen), China's struggle to stay ahead in the world of information capitalism, sees itself exploiting its own people through cheap labour, now not only in production, but also in waste management. This is the techno-Occidental drive that is China's response to the rapid economic and cultural transformations that Chen calls 'condensed urbanisation' of the last four decades.

Techno-Occidental elements do not only manifest through nationalist or ecopolitical writing and can be experienced through more basic storytelling components like character development too. In Maggie Shen-King, another Asian-American writer's debut novel, *An Excess Male* (2017), the consequences of China's introduction and management of the one-child policy provides the backdrop through the entire premise of the book that is set in a near-future Beijing. The people are managed by the government as commodities that need to be controlled, where the one-child policy has created a community of 'leftover men' who can now find love and marriage as a third husband, the maximum required by law. This commodification of people is part of the discourse of techno-Orientalism, with the State—the government—being the main protagonist that sees its people made of "Asian body as a form of expendable technology" (Roh et al. 11). However, in Shen-King's attempt to develop a more diverse perspective of the story, two of her main characters are from backgrounds that would usually be ostracized—a gay man, and an autistic man. In giving them vital roles to the story, Shen-King humanises them to counter the techno-Orientalist discourse through techno-Occidentalism.

In Chinese science fiction, from the stories that negotiate "between verisimilitude and universality" (Chau 124) to those that reimagine the past, like *Silk Punk*—"a blend of science fiction and fantasy...[that] draws inspiration from classical East Asian antiquity" (Misra)—they are just trying to glean some sort of position in which to operate in an extremely fecund and chaotic space, where, "The failure of

Communism as an alternative for overcoming the crises of capitalism means that the crises of capitalist culture, accompanied by the process of globalization, are manifesting in the daily lives of the Chinese people... [While] China, after a series of traumas from the economic reforms and paying a heavy price for development, has managed to take off economically and resurge globally” (Xia 381).

Chinese science fiction writers internationally find themselves working at a moment of contradiction, of failure (in politics) and success (in economy) through the literature they produce, that tries to commentate on extremely polarised events through cultural grounding (Chinese-ness) and repurposing a genre (science fiction) that has had its own rich history. This constant negotiation roots Chinese science fiction in a position of adversity. Some writers predict that this prosperous phase of Chinese science fiction’s popularity will wither away, while others continue to invest in its growth, as an instrument to promote diversity in science fiction (Xia & Chen).

Whatever the outcome, Chinese science fiction writers will continue to demand their positions in this Western genre by asserting their culture and developing new techno-Occidental ways to decolonise.

Notes

1. References to the Western genre of science fiction generally concerns British, American, French, and Soviet science fiction.

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